

VZCZCXRO4070
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #1360/01 2601647
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 161647Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3057
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2922
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3136
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001360

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/15/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: HIZBALLAH AND JUMBLATT'S PSP
RECONCILING, NOT ALLYING

REF: A. BEIRUT 1358
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1352

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Druze opposition leader and Minister of Youth and Sports Talal Arslan sponsored a September 15 "reconciliation" meeting at his home for representatives from rival Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's bloc and Hizballah aimed at easing tension prior to the re-launching of the National Dialogue. Jumblatt emphasized to the Ambassador in a telephone conversation afterwards that the meeting, prompted by the assassination of a Druze opposition figure (Ref B), focused on the security of "his people" and easing tensions between Shia and Druze in the mountains.

[1](#)2. (C) After the meeting, the participants stated publicly that they had agreed to dialogue, not violence, while restating their allegiances to their respective political alliances. March 14 contacts reported privately that they had been informed (and not consulted) prior to the meeting, and while not thrilled about the reconciliation, did not believe Jumblatt would actually switch sides. End summary.

DRUZE OPPOSITION LEADER HOSTS
HIZBALLAH AND RIVAL DRUZE REPRESENTATIVES

[1](#)3. (C) On September 15, opposition-aligned Druze Minister Talal Arslan hosted Hizballah officials and members from Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), representing their leader and Arslan rival, Walid Jumblatt. Hizballah officials, including Minister of Labor Mohammed Fneish, MP Ali Ammar, security official Wafiq Safa, and others, met with Jumblatt's advisor and PSP MP Akram Shehayyeb, Druze Minister of State and MP Wael Abu Faour, and PSP media commissioner Rami al Rayyes for approximately two hours on the eve of the launch of the National Dialogue (Ref A).

JUMBLATT: FOCUSED ON
"SECURITY OF THE MOUNTAIN"

[1](#)4. (C) Jumblatt emphasized to the Ambassador in a September 15 telephone conversation after the meeting had concluded that the meeting focused "on the security of the mountain."

He underscored that the meeting should be viewed as a continuation of the security "normalization" undertaken in recent months by the committee headed by Shehayyeb and Safa. He explained that the September 10 Saleh Aridi assassination (Ref B) spurred him to accelerate the committee's efforts, interpreting the assassination as a direct warning to Arslan "not to get too close" to him.

¶15. (C) Explaining that he needed to do more to reduce the possibility of violence reoccurring in the villages with mixed Druze/Shia populations, Jumblatt said, "I have to think of my people; I have to defend my people." Although he noted that the Shia population leaned more toward Amal Movement than Hizballah in these areas, he felt that tensions remained high.

¶16. (C) Former minister and MP Marwan Hamadeh, closely allied with Jumblatt, stressed to the Ambassador the same evening that the meeting did not include the top leadership (Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah and Jumblatt), and focused on reducing tensions in Choueifat, Dahiyeh, Baissour, Aley, and Kaifoun. Other interlocutors assured the Ambassador that the meeting should be taken in the context of the Aridi assassination and viewed as an attempt to ease tensions prior to the National Dialogue.

¶17. (C) Jumblatt bloc MP Akram Shehayyeb, who attended the reconciliation meeting, confirmed to Pol/Econ Chief on September 16 that the purpose was to ease tensions in the mountain. The Aridi assassination and subsequent increase in tension in Aley led to more frequent contacts, he said, and

BEIRUT 00001360 002 OF 003

Jumblatt's request for the reconciliation meeting. Both Jumblatt and Arslan suspected Syria of being behind the attack, he explained, and feared more violence.

AGREE TO DIALOGUE,
NOT VIOLENCE

¶18. (C) Shehayyeb said the meeting was good, describing his Hizballah interlocutors as respectful, especially Wafiq Safa, who led the delegation. Shehayyeb, noting that he began consulting with Safa by phone following the May violence in an effort to prevent further Shia/Druze conflicts, said he had only met him once, at the welcome reception for former Israeli prisoner of Samir Qantar, but found him to be an honest and powerful person. He also complimented Fneish, describing him as more conciliatory than Mahmoud Qomati, whom Shuhayyeb said appeared tense and nervous during the meeting, orating on the solidity of the resistance and accusing March 14 of turning Syria into an enemy and Israel as a friend. Fneish and Safa appeared annoyed with Qomati, Shuhayyeb said, with Fneish reportedly telling him that, "We want to open a new page, although we are in different positions. We want to resolve any problem through cooperation and reconciliation in the adjacent areas."

¶19. (C) Shehayyeb said a second reconciliation meeting would take place on September 17, again at Arslan's residence. The purpose this time was to bring together the heads of the PSP and Hizballah student bodies to further consolidate security on the eve of the academic year. Shehayyeb explained that a large number of Druze students were afraid to attend classes at the Lebanese University, which is located near the predominantly Shia southern suburbs.

¶10. (C) Arslan advisor Marwan Abu Fadel told LES Senior Political Advisor that the participants agreed to resolve their differences through dialogue, not violence, and plan to continue their reconciliation meetings.

JUMBLATT DENIES CHANGING CAMPS,
CONSULTS/INFORMS MARCH 14 COLLEAGUES

¶11. (C) Jumblatt admitted to the Ambassador that his March 14 partners had been "nervous" about the meeting, and that he had reached out to them beforehand. Ghattas Khoury, senior advisor to majority leader Saad Hariri, told the Ambassador that he met with Jumblatt hours before the meeting and that Jumblatt "insisted" to him that the meeting did not/not represent a "divergence" by the PSP from the March 14 alliance. Shehayyeb told Pol/Econ Chief that a "furious" Jumblatt told Khoury he was not planning to change camps, but needed to do something to defuse tensions in the mountains.

¶12. (S) Shehayyeb also disclosed that Hizballah is eager to secure a meeting between Hizballah SYG Nasrallah and Hariri, adding that Internal Security Forces intelligence chief Wissan Hassan was pushing Hariri hard on this. According to Shehayyeb, Safa proposed to Hariri to bring a large Hizballah delegation (minus Nasrallah, due to security concerns) to Qoreitem to apologize for the May clashes as Hariri had requested, paving the way for Hariri to pay a later visit to Nasrallah.

¶13. (C) March 14 SYG Fares Suaid told LES Senior Political Advisor that Jumblatt informed Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, Kataeb leader and former President Amine Gemayel, and Hariri on his decision to talk to Hizballah. (Comment: While Suaid downplayed the PSP-Hizballah meeting, saying it was only to maintain security and stability, he came across as downtrodden, likely concerned about March 14 unity. End comment.) Shehayyeb confirmed that Jumblatt had obtained Gemayel's blessing, and notified Nayla Mouawad, but said Geagea did not return Abu Faour's phone calls prior to the meeting.

¶14. (C) March 14 MP Samir Franjieh told LES Senior Political Advisor that he did not anticipate that Jumblatt would actually ally with Hizballah. However, he noted, the meeting

BEIRUT 00001360 003 OF 003

did cause panic among March 14 Christians and Hariri. Franjieh said Jumblatt "went too far and too quickly," adding that he believes Jumblatt has recognized this for himself. MP Boutros Harb repeated Franjieh's assessment that Jumblatt will not go far with his reconciliation with Hizballah.

¶15. (C) Abu Faour reiterated in a public statement that PSP members had first consulted with their March 14 allies, and assured his allies that PSP was not abandoning them. For his part, Arslan met with Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun prior to the meeting to "receive his blessing," as stated by Abu Fadel. It is believed that Hizballah also made calls to its allies in advance of the meeting.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) This development follows on the heels of a September 11 article in pro-opposition al-Akhbar, which quoted Jumblatt as saying, "I have changed. We must accommodate Hizballah's weapons." Jumblatt issued an objection, claiming his words were taken out of context. The article, coupled with the reconciliation meeting, would logically lead some to question whether Jumblatt was about to desert the March 14 ship. However, given that Hizballah and the PSP have been working for months -- albeit prior to September 15 solely by phone -- to ensure security and stability, and very real threats of renewed Shia/Druze violence, we are inclined to take Jumblatt at his word that the meeting portends no political rapprochement, at least for the immediate future. The fact that many of our March 14 contacts appear relatively unruffled by the meeting further reassures us. At the same time, however, many view Jumblatt as a weathervane of changing political winds, and are wary of a possible political reconciliation with Hizballah (perhaps along the lines of the 2005 quadripartite agreement). We will see Jumblatt September 17 to follow up. End comment.

